

some disappointment that the system was not implemented with as much bottom-up, citizen participation as was hoped or as promised. Interestingly, Ley also detects budding nostalgia for the distressful waterlogged days of yesteryears; residents identify those past years as a time of struggle (*perjuangan*)—an idiom that resonates deeply with revolutionary, nationalist valour in Indonesia and that provides ordinary citizens with profound meaning. Ultimately, we must consider what the occasional development success under more democratic conditions teaches us about evolving state-society relations in twenty-first century Indonesia, that is, until the rising seas eventually reclaim not just this section of northern Semarang—which the experts believe is certain—but innumerable coastlines across Indonesia and elsewhere.

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Upland Geopolitics: Postwar Laos and the Global Land Rush. By Michael B. Dwyer. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022. xv+230 pp.

In *Upland Geopolitics*, Dwyer renders the definitive account of land concessions in Laos. Reporting on his fourteen-year investigation into Chinese-backed rubber plantations in the northwest of Laos, Dwyer links on-the-ground observations to global debates about the causes and consequences of what some call the global “land grab” but which Dwyer more moderately suggests is a “land rush”, because the outcomes are varied and rarely predictable from the outset.

Dwyer has done a great service to Lao studies by rendering such a lively treatment to a topic that was in danger—after all these years and all this attention—of growing dull. Much of the book is taken up with Dwyer’s recurring and candid attempts to read maps.

Dwyer finds maps in archives (mostly, it seems, the Texas Tech University's Vietnam Center), in reports (he draws extensively on the document holdings of development institutions in Vientiane), and, in one case, in a district capital in the form of a hand-painted map. Even with all of his qualifications in geography (Dwyer is an assistant professor of geography at Indiana University, Bloomington), reading Lao maps was still not straightforward. Anyone who has spent a significant period of time in Laos will be familiar with the Land Allocation maps in each village, which routinely have nothing to do with how land is actually used. Even if one is lucky enough to obtain a relatively detailed map of rural Laos, it is common for names not to match what one finds on the ground. Dwyer's book can be read as a very serious attempt to make sense of such puzzling maps via deep reading, and in the process he makes sense of the larger topic of land rush. In this sense, the book sits solidly within a critical human geography tradition, using the tools offered by geography—such as scale, mapping and land use—to launch a much wider critical analysis.

Dwyer also situates the book as an “ethnography of upland government” (p. 18). I like the idea that government itself might constitute an *ethnos*, a people, with its own unique culture and set of symbolic meanings and rituals that can be captured in a certain kind of *-graphy*; i.e., writing. At the risk of repeating myself (I have written elsewhere, with Pierre Petit, on the anthropology of the state), it is noteworthy that much self-professed ethnographic work on Laos is concerned with the state (High and Petit 2013). If it is possible to treat the state ethnographically, it is because the state itself is peopled (that is, made up of people), not because any given government can be treated as an *ethnos*. Ethnography of a peopled state proceeds by close observation of the intimate experiences of living in, through and beyond state processes. The archetypal example of this kind of ethnography, for me, is Tess Lea's description of the varied emotions pulsing like blood through an everyday meeting of bureaucrats (Lea 2008). Only some of these emotions are related to the topic of the meeting, but Lea argues all

are relevant to an ethnography of the state. Dwyer's ethnography of upland government does not give us any hint of such gritty realities. Instead, Dwyer's focus is more abstract: the district, central authorities and the occasional village unit. Then there is the rubber company. It seems Dwyer did not have access to Chinese company directors or even employees. Instead, company motives are read through its actions and sometimes through its maps. What emerges, then, is an ethnography with no human characters. Dwyer skates close to treating the state and the company as peoples instead of peopled.

Partly, this approach seems to be inspired by Dwyer's Foucauldian leanings. Dwyer's evocation of Foucault comes alongside his reading of 1980s Lao governance documents, which are high "siege socialism" (I use the term in the sense proposed by Michael Parenti [1997]). Just as the Lao state was emphasizing the very real security risks posed by deliberate destabilization of the nascent people's republic because of identifiable, externally organized incursions, Foucault (1988) was assuring us that power is diffuse, capillary and infinitesimal. Dwyer dismisses the Lao concerns as "propaganda" (p. 97) but endorses Foucault as "at least adequate to the complexity at hand" (p. 102). But I wonder if the two—Lao siege socialism and confounding Foucauldian-speak—are better read as contemporaneous products of a 1980s geopolitics that we can now view more clearly and with more balance with the benefit of hindsight.

The book would have benefited from a clearer analysis of outcomes. Laos attained significant economic growth in the period under analysis. Poverty declined. Incomes rose. Child mortality dropped. Life expectancy jumped. Laos now has the world's fastest falling rate of maternal mortality. Something happened during the period under study that roughly aligned with the Lao state's developmental goals. This might not be a countryside populated by legible, settled contract farmers, but there was a transformation, nonetheless. Did rubber contribute to this transition? Or was it a hindrance? If the population were not absorbed into contract rubber farming as planned, then where *did* they go? Despite Dwyer's commendable deep readings, there is still, by the end of the book,

an air of mystery around his central question about the causes and consequences of land deals in Laos.

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Malaysian Crossings: Place and Language in the Worlding of Modern Chinese Literature. By Cheow Thia Chan. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 298 pp.

Studies on Chinese literature could no longer overlook the literature produced outside mainland China, especially after the emergence of Sinophone studies in English-language scholarship over a decade ago. Critics regard Mahua (Malaysian Chinese) literature as a distinctive manifestation of Sinophone literature, notable for its outstanding production of Chinese-language creative writing from Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Sinophone literature existed before the term Sinophone gained traction in academia, in a way that their “covert globality” (p. 1) was previously unnoticed. In Sinophone regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, authors and critics have long nurtured local literary traditions and intellectual discourse.